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ABSTRACT

In February 1995, Arkansas' Mid-South Community College was granted initial candidacy status for accreditation with the North Central Association (NCA). Following the evaluation visit, college personnel realized that they had been overly concerned about achieving immediate satisfaction of the NCA's General Institutional Requirements and Criteria for accreditation and not sufficiently prepared to benefit from the visit. Therefore, for a second evaluation visit in November 1996 for continued candidacy, the college developed a formative approach to evaluation that focused on the candidacy process as one of learning and growth to refine and fulfill the college's mission. One of the key elements of this approach were efforts made to gain the NCA evaluators help in determining ways to address problems identified during the visit. Self-study committee chairs, faculty, and administrators identified specific topics to discuss with the evaluators, related to how well the college had addressed previous problem areas and strategies for using assessment data in effecting curricular and instructional improvements. Two NCA evaluators acted as consultants to the college, charging the NCA per diem rate and undertaking a "mock" visit prior to the second evaluation visit. In using such an approach, the college leadership should set a positive tone for the process and encourage all constituencies to be open and candid in conversations with visit team members. (HAA)

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Maximizing the Consultant Component of Evaluation Visits for Candidacy Institutions

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Maximizing the Consultant Component of Evaluation Visits for Candidacy Institutions

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Background Information

Mid-South Community College (MSCC) is a public, two-year college authorized to grant associate degrees and technical certificates in both transfer and technical/occupational programs. First established as a vocational-technical school in the late 1970's, the institution was one of ten such Arkansas schools legislated in 1991 to become technical or community colleges. Of these ten, MSCC was deemed the least likely to succeed by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education because of administrative and financial weaknesses, low enrollment, and inadequate facilities. Nevertheless, Mid-South was the only one of these ten institutions to pursue status as a community college, a choice which required passage of a local millage and satisfaction of more stringent requirements for regional accreditation.

The college was granted candidacy status with NCA in February of 1995 and completed its visit for continued candidacy in November of 1996. Its accreditation visit is scheduled for the fall of 1998.

Since it first began to seek candidacy status in 1992, the college has been involved in a tremendous growth process. Student enrollment has escalated at an annual rate of approximately 42 per cent--from 100 to 800 students; the numbers of staff and faculty have more than doubled; administrative departments and academic programs germane to higher education have been created; planning, budgeting, governance, and assessment processes have been developed and implemented; approximately $6 million dollars has been raised to provide new facilities; and two self-studies have been completed.

The influx of new initiatives and new personnel makes change a constant at the College, and personnel are so involved in creating and implementing new initiatives that they often forget to step aside to consider how others may have addressed similar issues or problems. Following the institution's evaluation visit for initial candidacy, college personnel realized that they had been overly concerned about achieving immediate satisfaction of the General Institutional Requirements and Criteria in order to obtain the evaluation team's approval and not sufficiently prepared to *benefit* from the visit.

A formative, developmental approach to candidacy would have been a better approach. Team members brought expertise and experience that were of valuable benefit in

establishing priorities for action and in effecting refinements and improvements to programs and processes. Key opportunities for assistance during this first visit were missed, however, because most personnel were not primed or prepared to seek help. Consequently, the college's second evaluation visit (for continued candidacy) was approached from a different perspective.

Preparing College Personnel to Benefit from the Evaluation Visit

Institutions should take care to prepare the self-study document far enough in advance that all campus personnel have the time to review and contemplate the document. Even in institutions where everyone participates in the self-study process, self-study committee members most likely focus so intently on their own areas of investigation that they do not have a holistic picture of the institution.

Campus leaders should provide opportunities for personnel to discuss the self-study as a whole and determine how the findings of their particular committees relate to and impact the findings of other groups. If the Self-Study is, as it should be, an honest assessment of the institution's strengths and challenges, the challenges to institutional development should be clearly stated in the self-study. However, personnel need the opportunity to review and discuss these identified challenges, as well as possible ways of addressing them so that they can develop specific questions to ask of the consultant/evaluators. The development of such questions should be a mandatory part of the self-study process.

Because very few personnel at Mid-South had ever experienced an evaluation visit by an accrediting agency, the President arranged for a "mock visit" a month before the scheduled NCA visit for initial candidacy. The "mock" team consisted of a former member of the NCA Evaluator/Consultant Corps, two self-study coordinators from sister institutions that had recently had successful visits, and a representative from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, who had expertise in accreditation initiatives.

The benefits of the mock visit were twofold. Not only did college personnel get a preview of how a visit would be conducted and what their roles would be (which allayed many anxieties about being evaluated), they also received a critique of the Self-Study document and the materials in the Resource Room. College personnel then had the opportunity to address some identified weaknesses in both areas prior to the team visit.

Challenges identified through Mid-South's candidacy visit included improvements to shared governance, institutional planning, cost centered budgeting, academic rigor, and integrity of student records. While all were addressed by the "mock" and actual evaluation teams, college personnel did not specifically consider how to enlist the consultant/evaluators' help in determining ways to address these challenges.

During the two years between the college's NCA visits for initial and continued candidacy, the President searched for expert assistance with institutional planning and assessment. However, the fees charged by many consultants are prohibitive for small colleges with limited budgets. Consequently, assistance was sought from professionals who serve, or have served, in the NCA Consultant/Evaluator Corp. Because MSCC was a candidate institution with NCA, they charged their NCA *per diem* rate. In addition to providing interim assistance with planning and assessment, two of these consultants conducted a second "mock" visit prior to the college's continued candidacy visit.

Realizing the benefits of viewing NCA visits as "formative" rather than "summative" assessments, College personnel were much better prepared to take advantage of consultant/evaluators' expertise during the second round of visits. Self-Study committee chairpersons, faculty, and administrators identified specific topics to discuss with the visitors. These topics related to how well the institution had addressed the concerns and suggestions identified from the first NCA visit, if college personnel had correctly identified the remaining challenges, and suggestions for ways to address the remaining challenges.

A "mock" visit and the development of questions prior to the NCA visit can be particularly helpful to the President in preparing for the visit. He/she should insure that the team chair has scheduled time for him to meet with each team member. These meetings are opportunities for candid discussions of internally identified priorities and concerns. Experienced team members can bring a wealth of information gleaned from a variety of institutions. They can help the President establish priorities for action, identify other institutions that have successfuly solved problems faced by the institution, and provide a broad perspective on external trends that may affect the growth and development of the institution.

Questions for the consultant evaluators should, ideally, be prepared in advance and reviewed by the Self-Study Steering Committee and the senior administration to eliminate duplication and to establish priorities based upon the needs of the institution and upon the timeline established to achieve accreditation. Mid-South personnel were much better prepared for the second visit in that they had identified implementation of the assessment plan as a major priority. Consequently, they had developed specific questions about how to document the use of assessment data in effecting curricular and instructional improvements. Team members provided materials from their own institutions and identified other sources of assistance based upon their visits to other colleges.

Because time is of the essence during visits, the President should inform the team chair, in advance, of the institution's desire to maximize the consultant aspect of the visit. Equally important, such a request establishes a positive tone for the visit. It indicates that the institution views the accreditation process as a beneficial and positive opportunity for continued improvement. In addition, clinical self-examination and the willingness to openly discuss one's weaknesses are signs of institutional maturity.

Either the President or the Self-Study Coordinator should provide the team chair with a written list of the target areas/or questions. Such a list can enable the team to identify resources and prepare advice--in advance of the visit. The team chair may even decide to include consultations between the team and college personnel in the calendar of events for the visit or may devote part of the exit interview to addressing these questions.

The President should encourage all college constituencies to be open, candid, and receptive in their conversations with team members during the team visit. Although certain people may be specifically designated to seek assistance from the team on identified issues, all personnel will benefit from knowing what those issues are and from being prepared to discuss them with the team.

Following the visit, college personnel can then discuss the team members' advice and pursue identified resources to develop strategies for addressing the challenges the institution has yet to meet.

Summary

The candidacy program of the North Central Association provides guidance for new institutions in developing quality programs and processes. Much as educators criticize students for wanting the diploma more than the education, candidate institutions should not focus solely on the validation that accreditation provides but on the candidacy process as one of learning and growth that helps them refine and fulfill their institutional missions.

The North Central Association can support this process by establishing a "bureau" of current or former consultant/evaluators who are willing to assist candidate institutions, at the NCA per diem rate, with "mock" visits or with developing and implementing strategies for meeting the General Institutional Requirements or Criteria for Accreditation. They can provide direction and identify resources that current staff may not be able to provide or that the college can not otherwise afford.

Even if institutions choose not to avail themselves of such help, the proper preparation *prior* to a formal evaluation visit can maximize the consultant component. As a result, the formal visit itself can be a tremendous value when compared to the fees charged by most consultants.